



# Experiencing Diversity through Children's Multicultural Literature

by Kathryn L. Davis, Bernice G. Brown, Ann Liedel-Rice, and Pamela Soeder

*Kathryn L. Davis is an Associate Professor of Physical Education Teacher Education at Middle Tennessee State University. She has presented at more than 60 professional conferences, including the American Educational Research Association, and has published more than 25 professional articles.*

*Bernice G. Brown is an Associate Professor of Education at Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania. Her research interests include literacy, teacher education, and multiculturalism, and her experiences include public school teaching and grant writing for federal programs for college freshmen. She is a member of the Delta Tau Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi.*

*Ann Liedel-Rice is a Professor and mentor for Carlow University's pre-service teachers in urban settings in Pittsburgh. Her research interests include education for diversity and urban education. She is founder and former director of Slippery Rock University's Urban Student Teaching Program and is a member of the Delta Tau Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi.*

*Pamela Soeder is a Professor of Education at Slippery Rock University and codirector of the Urban Student Teaching Program. She has presented on diversity and American Indian stereotypes, and was a consultant for the Carnegie Museum ALCOA Hall of American Indians.*

*Children's literature can enlighten teacher candidates who are preparing to teach in schools with diverse populations.*

**T**eacher educators are being challenged to prepare teacher candidates for work with diverse students. The candidates are predominantly European-American, middle-class, and monolingual; have had limited experiences with diverse populations; and may perceive diversity in a negative way (Zeichner and Hoeft 1996).

Teacher candidates' lack of understanding of diversity issues can negatively affect the educational success of their students (Gay 2002). For teacher candidates to work effectively with students from diverse cultures in all grade levels, they need to become familiar with some of the major issues that students confront in today's society. The study of children's literature from multiple perspectives can be a vehicle for developing an understanding of complex concepts related to multicultural issues (Bieger 1996).

This article suggests books for building teacher candidates' background knowledge so that they can reflect on their life experience related to multicultural issues. Four categories of multicultural literature are presented: racism, poverty, gender equity, and religious beliefs. For each category, selections of children's multicultural literature are summarized, followed by a series of questions. The questions are designed to inspire teacher candidates to reflect on their personal diversity beliefs.

### Category I: Racism

Often, institutions do little to prepare teacher candidates for issues of race. Teacher candidates must critically examine their racial assumptions about school and society so that they may develop a clearer understanding of racism. They can explore racism through the illustrations and language contained in children's literature.

*Red Bird* (Mitchell 1996) is about eliminating stereotypes that can lead to racism. Katie, a member of the Nanticoke Nation, is called Red Bird by her grand-

father. Each September, the family makes a trip from the city to Nanticoke country for the annual Pow Wow. Katie and her family look forward to this event because it is a time of celebration that preserves their heritage. This book challenges teacher candidates to rethink their views and assess their understanding of American Indians. How might your image of an American Indian change after reading this book?

**"Teacher candidates' lack of understanding of diversity issues can negatively affect the educational success of their students."**

What examples made you change your views?

When teacher candidates read the book *Felita* (Mohr 1979), they learn about the struggle of a Latino family that, to improve the children's education and future, moves to a predominantly white neighborhood. What did you learn about the goals all parents have for their children? What might teachers do to involve parents in the education of their children?

The crowd was angry; there was shouting and screaming,

"Go back to where you belong, we don't want you here." As Ruby walks between the marshals who escort her, she holds onto the belief that she has the right to be at any school, even the white school. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles 1995) tells about the courage of a six-year-old African-American girl in desegregating an all-white school in New Orleans. What cross-cultural understandings can be learned through Ruby's eyes? What are the similarities and differences between your experiences in starting school with those of Ruby Bridges?

The three books described discuss racial stereotypes, racism's impact on housing and education, and the teacher's role in decreasing racism in and outside of the classroom for all learners. When teacher candidates read children's literature about racism, they broaden their understanding of these important racial issues.

### Category II: Poverty

Before exposing teacher candidates to issues of poverty, "We must begin by assessing how our own socioeconomic backgrounds affect our views and ability to understand people reared under different circumstances" (Davidson and Schniedewind 1996, 51). This section describes three multicultural books that can help teacher candidates reflect on their own personal beliefs about poverty and understand various obstacles that poor students may encounter.

*Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis 1999) is a story that explores the fears and anxieties of a 10-year-old homeless child who escapes from an abusive foster home. Set in the 1930s during the Depression, Bud

is on-the-run looking for his father and armed with only a few clues of his father's whereabouts. Memories of his deceased Momma provide strength during his struggles. This book points out the challenges of worrying about food, where to sleep, and personal safety. How does Bud's life during the Depression compare with that of children in poverty and the homeless today? What might teachers do to facilitate an equitable education for children who live in poverty?

*Forged by Fire* (Draper 1997) illustrates the trauma of Gerald, a young child living in poverty with a substance-addicted Mama. After an extended absence, Mama returns with an abusive stepfather and a little "angel" half sister. Gerald struggles to protect his half sister from his cruel stepfather. Throughout the story, Gerald displays courage in meeting the daily challenges of poverty and abuse. Can you identify one person who was a role model for Gerald? How might teachers serve as a support system for children in poverty?

*Just Juice* (Hesse 1999) is a story that illustrates obstacles faced by a family living in poverty and having a child that has difficulty in learning how to read. Juice, a nine-year-old, is repeating third grade. The strengths of Juice's problem-solving skills and her ability to use her hands are overlooked at school. What are the strengths of Juice and her family? What should teachers do to support Juice and her family? What criteria would you use to assess Juice's performance in school?

Lessons in these three books portray some of the barriers in obtaining a quality education for students who come from poverty backgrounds. Teacher candidates

must value the realities of students living in poverty and the impact of poverty on learning and society.

### Category III: Gender Equity

Teacher candidates must learn to reflect on their own teaching and make a conscious effort to structure their classes so that both genders have equal opportunities. Research has shown that girls are exposed to three times as many boy-centered stories as girl-centered stories (Pipher 1994). If female characters are omitted in

**"Teacher candidates must value the realities of students living in poverty and the impact of poverty on learning and society."**

books and male-exclusive language is used, females learn that their identities or experiences have no place in literature or history (Sadker and Sadker 1994). The three books summarized here can stimulate teacher candidates' reflection about gender-fair situations, language, and role models.

*Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt* (Ernst 1983) is about an adult male named Sam who begins to mend an awning by sewing together colorful patches

of cloth. Sam discovers that he enjoys sewing, but meets with scorn and ridicule when he asks his wife whether he could join her quilting club. Sam starts his own men's quilting club, and they compete in the county fair quilting contest. What activities around the house do you think both a mother *and* a father could do today? What other types of activities might boys or girls be excluded from because of their gender?

*Mama and Me and the Model T* (Gibbons 1999) is a story about Mama, who gets behind the wheel of her husband's new Model T and proves that she can drive a car as well as the men of the family. Mama's husband shows his sons how to drive the Model T while he tells his daughters that "Cars are for boys" and "Girls just ride." Mama drives off with her daughters in the Model T and when she drives back into the yard, all agree that the Model T is for everyone in the family to drive, not just the boys. What message do you find in this story about the role of women in families? How does this story help children learn about gender equity in the family and in society?

*Mama is a Miner* (Lyon 1994) is a children's book about working mothers. Told from the daughter's point of view, the story shows how proud she is of her mother, who is a miner in Black Mountain. She wishes that her mother still worked at a store and was far away from the explosions in the mine. She realizes, however, that the store job does not pay very well. How can a mother's dangerous job affect her daughters or her sons? Would their fears about her safety be manifested differently in boys than in girls?

Gender is the characteristic that can shape a child's experience more than any other factor, with the possible exception of race (Phinney and Rotheram 1987). Children's books involving lessons about attitudes toward gender roles in family relationships promote teacher candidates' understanding.

### Category IV: Religious Beliefs

Schools are experiencing demographic changes that reflect not only racial and ethnic growth, but also religious diversity (Haynes 1990). In addition to Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths, a number of other religions now are represented in schools. This religious diversity requires teacher candidates to understand religious practices that are different from their own.

*The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen 1988) discusses the religious persecution of Jews during World War II. The story is about Hannah, a Jewish girl visiting her family during Passover. Hannah has the unusual experience of being transported back in time where she is a World War II prisoner in a concentration camp. How do you think teachers can help their students understand which religions are marginalized in today's world? What groups have experienced persecution since September 11, 2001?

*The Breadwinner* (Ellis 2001) takes place when the Taliban, a religious group, took over Afghanistan. Life changes drastically for Parvana, an 11-year-old girl who is not allowed by the Taliban to attend school, shop, or play outside simply because she is a girl. When Parvana's fa-

ther is taken away by the Taliban, Parvana becomes the "breadwinner," and she disguises herself as a boy to earn money. What are some examples of oppressive and sexist behaviors in this story? Why is education for girls and women valuable?

*Magid Fasts for Ramadan* (Matthews 2000) is a story about Magid, a Muslim boy who wants to observe Ramadan like the rest of his family. When Magid goes to school, he learns just how difficult it is to go without food all day, from sunrise to sunset. He decides to wait until he is 12 years old to observe the religious practice of fasting. What will you do to support students who want to follow religious practices different from your own?

Teachers have a responsibility to be aware of religious diversity and the influence of religion in the community in which they work (Gollnick and Chinn 2002). When teacher candidates read multicultural literature about religious diversity, they broaden their knowledge about different religious groups' experiences in the world today.

### Conclusion

Teacher educators must encourage their teacher candidates to read multicultural literature that reflects our diverse society. The books reviewed in this article provide an avenue to stimulate reflective thinking in teacher candidates. Beiger (1996, 311) eloquently noted:

*Each time we read a good piece of literature, we are changed by the experience: we see the world in a new way. For these reasons, literature can be a powerful*

*vehicle for understanding cultures and experiences different from our own.*

Through the use of multicultural literature, teacher educators who mentor and guide teacher candidates in all subject areas can have a positive impact on the lives of these future educators and the students they will teach.

### References

- Bieger, E. M. 1996. Promoting multicultural education through a literature-based approach. *The Reading Teacher* 49(4): 308-12.
- Davidson, E., and N. Schniedewind. 1996. Class differences: Economic inequality in the classrooms. In *Common bonds: Anti-bias teaching in a diverse society*, 2nd ed., ed. D. A. Byrnes and G. Kiger, 49-63. Wheaton, MD: Association for Childhood Education.
- Gay, G. 2002. *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Electronic resource. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gollnick, D. M., and P. C. Chinn. 2002. *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society*, 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Haynes, C. C. 1990. *Religion in American history: What to teach and how*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Pipher, M. P. 1994. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls*. New York: Ballantine.
- Phinney, J. S., and M. J. Rotheram, eds. 1987. *Children's ethnic socialization: Pluralism and development*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Sadker, M., and D. Sadker. 1994. *Failing at fairness: How America's schools cheat girls*. New York: Scribner's.
- Zeichner, K., and K. Hoeft. 1996. Teacher socialization for cultural diversity. In *Handbook of research on teacher education: A project of the American Association of Teacher Educators*, 2nd ed., ed. J. Sikula, 525-47. New York: Macmillan.

### Children's Books Cited

#### Category I: Racism

- Coles, R. 1995. *The story of Ruby Bridges*. New York: Scholastic.
- Mitchell, B. 1996. *Red bird*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Mohr, N. 1979. *Felita*. New York: Dial Press.

#### Category II: Poverty

- Curtis, C. P. 1999. *Bud, not Buddy*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Draper, S. M. 1997. *Forged by fire*. New York: Atheneum.
- Hesse, K. 1999. *Just Juice*. New York: Scholastic.

#### Category III: Gender Equity

- Ernst, L. C. 1983. *Sam Johnson and the blue ribbon quilt*. New York: Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard.
- Gibbons, F. 1999. *Mama and me and the Model T*. New York: Morrow.
- Lyon, G. E. 1994. *Mama is a miner*. New York: Orchard Books.

#### Category IV: Religious Beliefs

- Ellis, D. 2001. *The breadwinner*. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre.
- Matthews, M. 2000. *Magid fasts for Ramadan*. New York: Clarion Books.
- Yolen, J. 1988. *The devil's arithmetic*. New York: Viking Penguin.